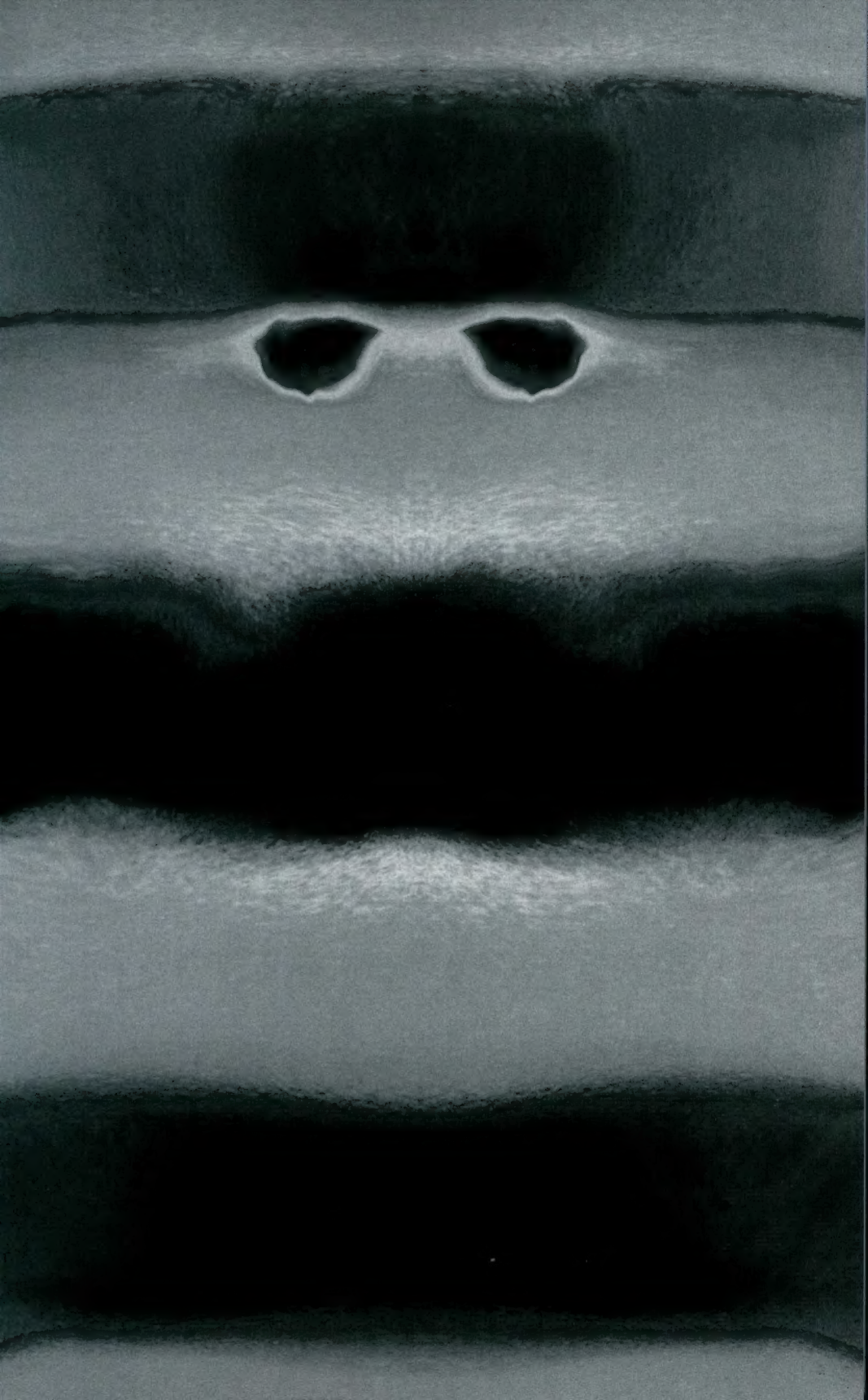


THE GLEANER

2023

2024



The Gleaner is a theme-based literary journal edited by the undergraduate students at Delaware Valley University.

We showcase all forms of written work as well as artwork and photography pieces.

This year's theme is *Hidden Beauty*.

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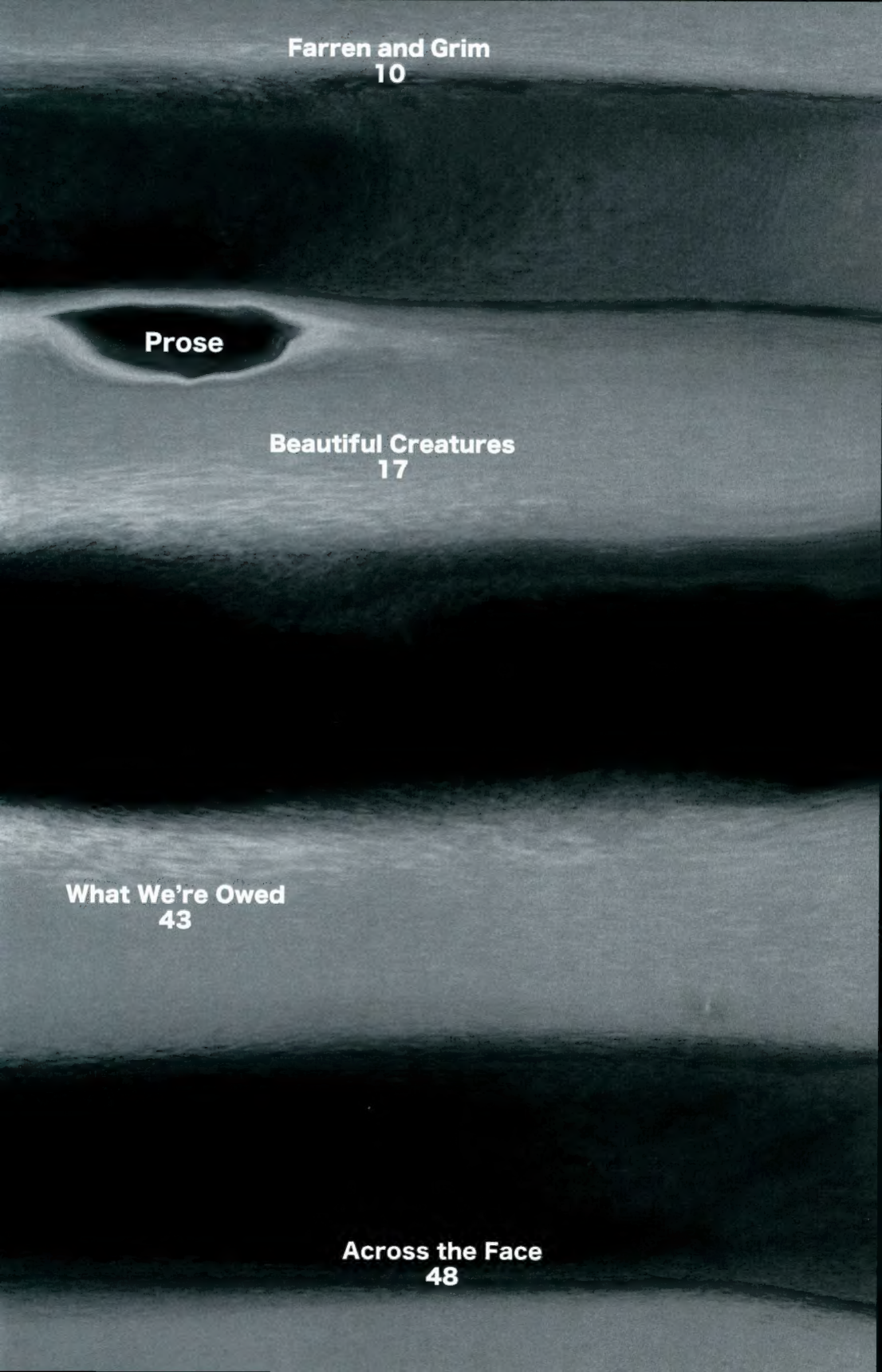
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My Room Might Be Haunted But

By Zaida Martin

the bugs on the window buzz
And then land in two-week-old
plant water in the clear glass
bottles, green on the bottoms
from buildup and slight neglect

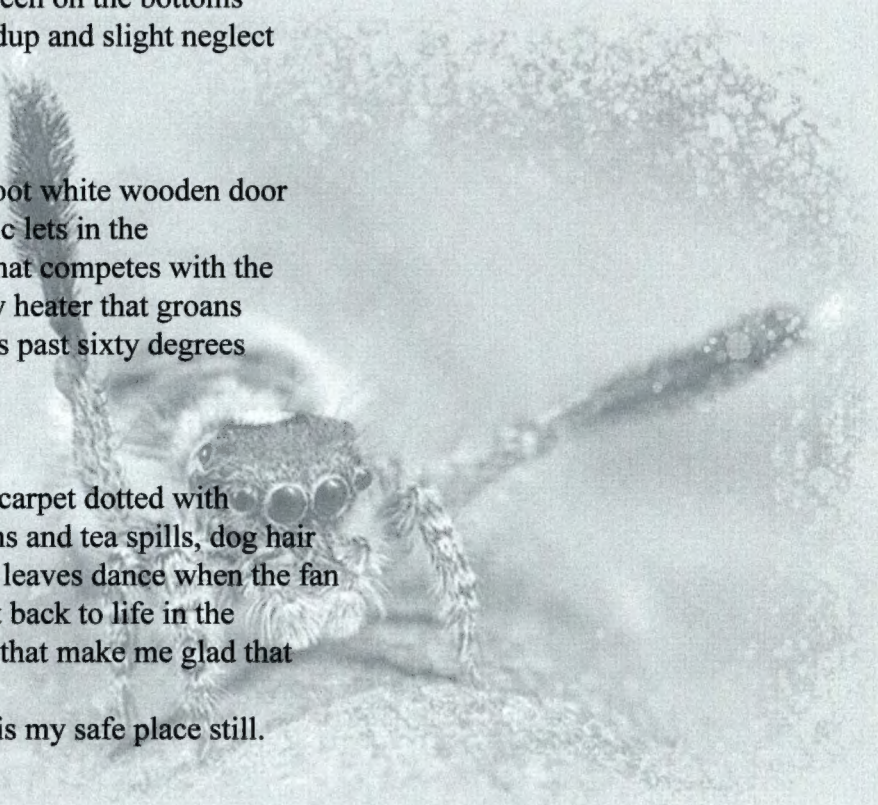
while

the four foot white wooden door
To the attic lets in the
Cold air that competes with the
the cranky heater that groans
and moans past sixty degrees

and

old beige carpet dotted with
Paint stains and tea spills, dog hair
And dead leaves dance when the fan
Is brought back to life in the
Summers that make me glad that

my room is my safe place still.



In Memoriam

By Joseph Gumina

I want to be buried without a cage,
So that I may,
Greet my fellow organisms,
Inside and out,
May they crawl into my ears,
To speak with my thoughts,
Slip through my teeth,
And eat among friends,
Burrow into my arms,
So that I may hold someone once again,
Squirm beneath my eyelids,
To see what I have seen,
Swarm my lungs with life,
Let them fill one last time,
Tunnel to my heart,
Share my desire and despair,
They alone will know,
My entire life story,
Whether good,
Or bad,
My memories will not die alone.



Farren and Grim

By Rebecca Pita

She has always been a curious little thing. Since the moment I met her at her untimely death, she had done nothing but ask questions. Unfortunately, she was not the first of her sort and won't be the last. She was just a child born to a mother and father who did not love her. Flying fists and roaring voices were all she knew, but her curiosity always lingered. Until the night the beatings became too much for her frail body which inevitably led to our meeting.

"Who are you?" her brittle voice asked me during our first encounter. She wasn't afraid of me like they had all been before her, death himself was coming to collect her soul. I gestured for her to follow, and her bony young body picked itself up and began to walk with me. I have found that silence makes the transition for the soul easier. *Most souls.*

"What's your name?" she continued as we walked through time itself. She looked around as we passed colors from all over the world simultaneously. Her worn face reflected red, yellow, and blue in streaks and passing colors, her eyes squinted at the sudden light. Minor scrapes and bruises littered her arms and hands as she tried to cover the light.

"Where are we going?"

I found that silence does not please her, in fact, it just adds to her list of questions.

"I am Death little thing. I am walking you to rest." I heard her bare feet pat a little faster to catch up right next to me.

"Your name is Death?" she tried looking up at me, but the lights were still too blinding for her adjusting eyes.

"No, I have many names."

"How many names? More than 10? I can count to 10 but I gotta look at my fingers." Her feet fell into line with mine. Most souls are not this talkative, at least not to me.

“What do I call you?” she asks as she begins to skip in pace with me.

“Grim.”

“Gram?” Her head leans to the side as she looks up and asks me the pronunciation.

I glanced down at the young girl beside me. Her hair was short but choppy, as if cut with scissors and her face too thin.

“Have you ever had Gram crackers? My teacher used to share them with me at school since I never had lunch. They were yummy but dry.” Silence fell upon us yet again as she finally adjusted to the light.

“Are we in a rainbow?” her skipping stalled as she asked the question.

“No, we are walking in time.” I tried to explain to the young girl who was twirling on her heels and laughing. She watched the colors change in different angles as she positioned her body.

“No, we are in a rainbow,” she giggled as her skipping returned until she was back in line with me. A soul laughing was not something I see very often; then again, she most likely had no idea what was going on. Her innocence.

“I once saw this big dog and his collar was so colorful like a rainbow. The lady let me pet him and he was super soft.”

A familiar chill ran through us as we continued our walk through time. We were halfway to her final resting place. Expecting her to be cold in her beat jeans and an old T-shirt, I warned her.

“If you are cold, take comfort in knowing we are almost there.” Her feet’s pitter-patter was light as she walked beside me. To my surprise, she looked up and smiled.

“It’s warmer than when Mama let me have a sleepover at the park alone! She went to dinner and forgot to pick me up.” Her smile showed her missing teeth.

“It was dark when she came back but she let me have a bite of a cupcake



when we got home!"

"Have you ever had a cupcake, Gram? Ooh, what do you think a Gram cracker cupcake tastes like?"

Many souls cry during the walk, realizing their life is over, regrets, wishes, and dreams never accomplished. She didn't get to live any of that, she had no idea what she had lost. An hour into our walk passes and her questions never let up, but her pacing slows.

"Are you cold?" she asked, still turning up to look at me.

"No, I never get cold," I remarked as I looked forward into the colorful pastel blues and purples the farther we went. Her steps had slowed but sped up until I felt a little hand tug on my sleeve.

"Do your hands get cold?" Her walking ceases as she holds onto me.

"No, my hands don't get cold." There was a pause, and then her small hand grasped onto mine.

"Are your hands cold little one?" I asked, bending slightly down toward her. She rubbed her eyes and shook her head, no, she was scared. Why was she scared now?

"Do you want to hold my hand little one?" I tried again and she shook her head again and yawned. She was tired, signaling we were getting close to the end.

"I'm Farren," she corrected me and looked onward as she rubbed her eyes.

"Do you want to hold my hand, Farren?" She looked back up at me and immediately looked back on the ground again retracting her hand from mine.

"Daddy doesn't like it when I touch him. He would yell and hit me and tell me to grow up and stop acting so needy and that no one needed a needy person." A feeling of cracking radiated in my body.

"I'm not your dad, don't worry." Her head perked up a little and met my eyes. The fear lingered but eased up and she smiled, a little smaller than before.

“I’d like to hold hands with you Gram, in the rainbow.”

I took her hand and we continued to walk down the bright and colorful *rainbow*. All souls have different reactions when they die, but little Farren is the first.

Some time passed and her questions ceased as sleepiness slowly took over. I purposely slowed my steps to stay in line with her pace.

“Are my parents going to be at the end of the rainbow?” Her voice was low and shaky.

“No, just you.” Her grip tightened in my hand, and she yawned again. Her feet dragged behind her, and I realized we were barely walking.

“Is it true there is treasure at the end of the rainbow?”

“Once you get there you can make and imagine anything you want, it’s yours.”

“What’s mine?”

“The resting place, it’s where you will stay.” I tried explaining to her but, if she has no idea what death is... I did not want to scare her. Looking down at her again I noticed her yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“Are you tired Farren?” I stopped our snail’s pace once again. She shook her head in agreement, her eyes were squinted and tired.

“We are almost there, then you can rest.” Silence.

“We have to keep going.” Silence. Then a small voice uttered.

“Gram my legs hurt.” She sounded as if she were going to cry. Her sudden personality change was normal at this point in the walk. Souls are reaching their destination, and some are excited, some are dreading it. She was tired, frail, and confused. I bent down, my face level with hers, and she looked at me, not with fear, but with curiosity.

“Should I carry you the rest of the way little Farren?” She reached and

touched my pale face and smiled, missing teeth showing and all.

“Yes, please,” she yawned, and I lifted the young girl. She felt like a feather, barely any weight to her.

“I’ve never been carried before,” she said as she looked over my shoulder. Then a barely audible murmur came from her

“It’s nice.”

I continued our original walking pace now, the cold becoming warmer and the colors turning into greens and blues. Every so often she would blurt out another question such as “How old are you?” “What is your favorite color?” and I found myself answering everything she asked.

“How old are you, Gram?”

“Hundreds of years old, my little Farren.”

“100?! That’s not a real number silly! I’m 6!”

Our simple conversations lasted our entire walk. She giggled and laughed some more. Her voice became more and more sleepy and when she was on the brink of sleep, we had finally made it. Each “final destination” was different for each soul. Some are met with other family members; some are met with hundreds of animals. She’s met with no one, no pets, just a simple green landscape with a large blue sky. The warm air swirls around us and she slowly rises in my arms.

“It’s so pretty.” She looks around and stillness is all we are met with as her grip tenses. I look down at the small figure in my arms and tears cloud her eyes and she silently begins to sob.

“Are you going to leave me alone too, Gram?” tucking herself back into my chest and crying. I was used to hearing souls cry and beg, but something in me broke for her. I continued walking to the grass surrounding us and knelt by a lonesome tree.

“Why don’t you rest? I’ll stay here until you fall asleep.” I spoke to her in a near whisper and she unraveled herself from me and sat in the grass. Her face was still spotted and red. She just looked up at me and nodded. I sat with

her as she lay down on the soft grass, the warm wind flowed through us, and the clouds moved slowly.

“Will you be here when I wake up, Gram?”

“No, I cannot come back once I have dropped you off.”

“What do I do here alone?”

“It’s your resting place, Farren, you can do whatever you want.”

“Can I make you stay?”

“No, I have other souls I have to walk with.” Stillness befell us once again as she just lay there and cried some more. I rubbed her back and spoke.

“You can dream of anything. You are free to do so now Farren, no one will hurt you anymore.” She looked at me and smiled.

“Can I dream of a Gram cracker cupcake?” I couldn’t help the chuckle that came from me.

“Yes, my Farren, as many Gram cracker cupcakes as you want.” She looked at me and smiled.

“I’ll dream of 100 Gram Cracker cupcakes then Gram!” She shouted and laid her head back down on the soft grass. I rubbed her back and petted her hair as she dozed off.

An hour or so went by to ensure she was asleep before I stood up. As I walked, I looked back at the young girl and noticed a large dog sitting where I once was. He was black with a white face and overlooked the sleeping girl. The dog looked at me and I couldn’t help but smile, he lay down by my Farren and I noticed his collar. The colors of the rainbow with details embroidered into it, with a name tag at the base of his throat.

“Gram.”

Stained

By Mouse Moseley

We are the costumes we wear
pearls draped around necks
french hoods pinned to hair
sleeves tied on tightly.
corsets to hide the unsightly
We are the costumes we wear.

Give me my mother's amber rings
I will show you my new-old
nicotine stained nails, and bring
me her wedding dress. Get close,
and I will show you a widow.
We stay strung along on strings.

Elizabeth sits for her portrait
in the teardropped pearl pendant.
and I can smell copper and salt
as the blood stains her neck
She has a duty of care not to repeat
but she can never, not ever, forget.

Beautiful Creatures

By Rebecca Worthington

Another? So soon? Iris stared at the dark oblong shape above her. It had been a few days since the last ship had passed. *These humans.* Iris rolled her black eyes. *Practically want to serve themselves up sailing into siren territory so often.* She paddled upward to investigate. Above her the ship was fairly normal, until she noticed something strange. There was a small fish struggling in the water nearby. Iris swam closer. The fish appeared to be caught in something, her white pupils examined the object when she remembered, nets she recalled the name, something one of her hypnotized preys had told her before he became her next meal. She enjoyed her conversations with them, despite the scolding she received from the other sirens not to play with her food. Such beautiful things they were, she found it useful and interesting to learn of such thing called ‘Human Nature.’ *Smart.* Iris thought to herself. *They hunt their food just like us.* Iris carefully maneuvered herself to reach the fish. *Surely they won’t mind if I steal a little snack.* Her webbed fingers inched closer and closer until she was able to get a grip on the slippery little creature, that’s when she felt the nets tighten around her body. *Uh oh.*

Up on the surface there was a young man, leaning on the edge of the boat looking out into the water, watching the ropes of the net dance back and forth with the waves, his leg violently bouncing up and down.

“Caspian!”

The young man jumped at the sound of his own name. Caspian turned to see another man a bit older than him. “Oh, hey Kai.”

“Are you doing alright? You look a bit nervous.” Kai asked.

“Oh, yeah I’m fine.” Caspian laughed, shooting Kai a friendly smile.

“What, are you expecting something to jump out at you?”

“Ha, no.”

“You sure? Maybe a shark or one of those mermaids you keep talking



about.” Kai said, giving Caspian a sly look.

Caspian rolled his eyes. “You know what, make fun of me all you want. You’re the one who’s going to feel really stupid when it turns out I’m right.”

Kai crossed his arms. “Well, since you’re feeling cocky, how about we bet on it. Twenty bits sound fair?”

Caspian smiled at him. “Deal.” The two shook hands and Kai walked away. Caspian’s smile faded as he glared daggers watching the other walk away. He turned back to the water. He looked down to the net and noticed the ropes were now violently jerking back and forth, a wicked smile quickly spread across his face. Caspian turned behind himself and yelled, “Someone pull the nets up!”

Iris continued to struggle in the net. She did everything she could think of to get free, but nothing worked, not even her serrated claws and teeth that were meant for descaling fish could cut through the ropes. The rough material irritated her skin and scales as she was pulled upward. In her panic she hummed a little melody to herself, and watched her grey skin turn a coral pink, a disguise much similar to those pesky merfolk who lived near the reef. Soon the brightness of the surface overwhelmed her, she sealed the gills on her neck shut and opened her nostrils allowing herself to gasp in the air on the surface, her own weight knocked her backwards in the net, she felt heavier and colder than normal. Amid her confusion, she heard gasps and chattering similar to the voices of her prey. She reached her claws up to grab the net and pulled herself up and looked out onto a group of sailors ogling her.

“It’s a Mermaid.” One of them whispered in disbelief.

“So, they do exist.” Another commented in the same tone.

Then Iris made eye contact with one. He looked like the men she usually hunted, younger than the others, tall and attractive. These ones seemed more willing to speak to her, not only that but she preferred the way they tasted compared to others. He let out a loud laugh like the bark of a seal and held his hand out to the person standing next to him, the other person groaned handing him a small pouch. Soon a plan began to form in Iris’s brain. Yes, this would work out nicely, and she would even get a snack afterward too. She took in a breath and began to sing, she eyed the young man as she did, watching as the tendrils of her melodies slipped into his brain seizing a tight grip onto his

consciousness that would never let go.

Just as she wished, he reached for the sword on his hip, discreetly he pulled the blade from its sheath and held it to his side. "What is she doing?" one of the sailors asked. That's when the young man lunged at the other burying the blade into the sailor's chest, blood splattered from the wound and onto the young man's face. The other sailors gasped in fear. Their attention turning to the young man instead. He pulled the sword out of the others' chest, his eyes narrowing as he watched as the other fell to the floor.

"Caspian, what are you doi-" The man who handed over the pouch began before the young man turned to shove the sword in his mouth. The end of the blade stuck out the back of his neck before it was pulled out. The young sailor on the other hand was breathing heavily and quickly becoming coated in blood.

"That's no Mermaid," one of the older sailors began. "It's a Siren! Grab your crossbows, kill the beast!" he shouted to a group of sailors. "Try to stop Caspian, but don't hurt him, he's the best deckhand we have!" he yelled to another.

"Captain!" another man replied in a hurt tone.

"You heard me!"

Iris watched as the men aimed their weapons at her, before any of them could get off a shot she directed the young sailor over to them. He slashed at a few with his sword making quick work of them. He disarmed another and shot him at close range, burying an arrow in his eye. Another he was able to push overboard, Iris watched as the other man screamed as he fell before hitting the water with a defining smack and steadily disappearing under the waves. Iris turned back to watch as her puppet continued his onslaught. One after the other he ended them, bodies of the crew dropping to the floor like rocks in the ocean. He seemed to dance to her song. Her song of slaughter.

Soon only the young man stood, his breath heavy after the massacre. Blood dripped from his face and his sword, the droplets mixing with the pool that had formed under his feet. He leaned his head back and stared up to the sky, the silence was deafening, the only sound that could be heard were the waves and his panting.

"Now, Puppet." Iris spoke, breaking the silence. "Come, cut me free and drown yourself." He didn't need her song anymore; he was too far gone.



The young man leaned his head forward and chuckled, which soon grew into a hysterical maniac laugh. Iris was taken aback. "Stupid Human!" She shouted. "What's so funny? Get over here and free me!" Soon his laughter died down, he turned and began to walk toward her a crazed look remained in his eyes.

"What's so funny?" he laughed as he approached her. He stood up on the edge of the ship, reached out and grabbed the net, pulling her closer to him. For the first time in her life, Iris was afraid of a human. She leaned backward in the net. The look on his bloodied face was terrifying. Though he was smiling, his eyes told a different story.

"What's funny is you thought you were in control."

But I thought-

He laughed, striking her with his blade.

Concealer

By Zaida Martin

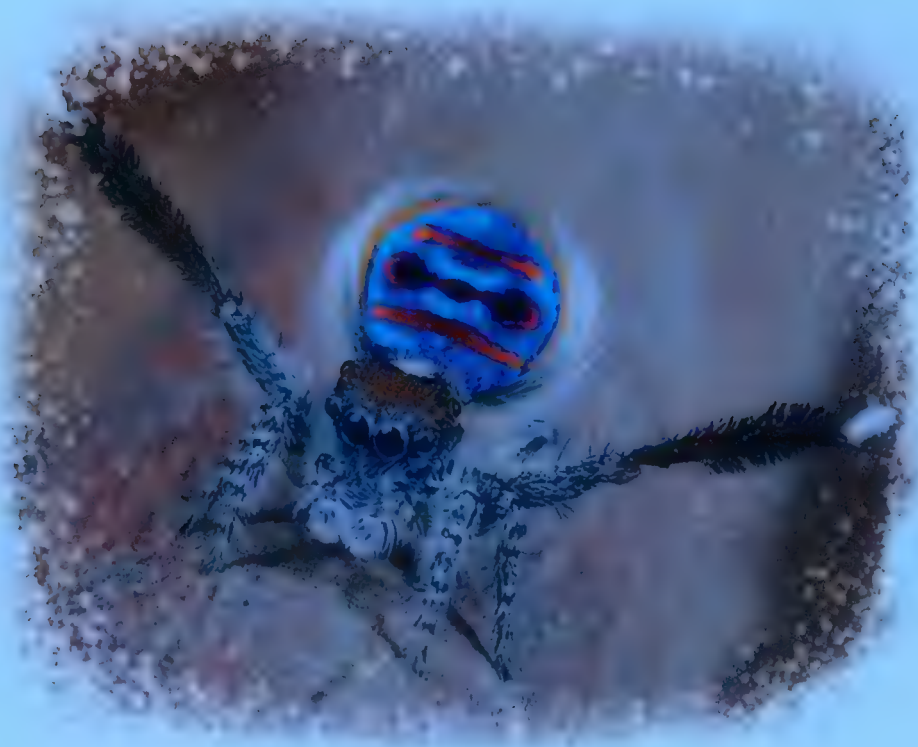
Mirrors stare back with the same old message
Your temple is wrong, your needs go unmet
Even tattoos can't cover the wreckage
Made by a child, not a woman quite yet

Thighs squeezed into jeans that show off all flaws
Arms crossed to hide breasts two sizes too big
Attracting gazes and stares just because
"They cannot help it," and again, it digs.

"but you are the earth" says the universe,
Pale lightning bolts run down legs and arm folds
Skin cratered and loved by the moon since birth
Soft curves carved into body of pure gold

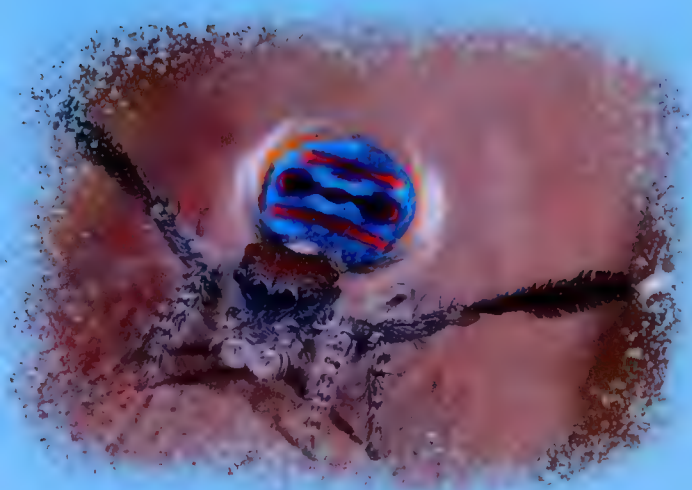
Small hearts on my face made with concealer
Mirrors finally begin to see her

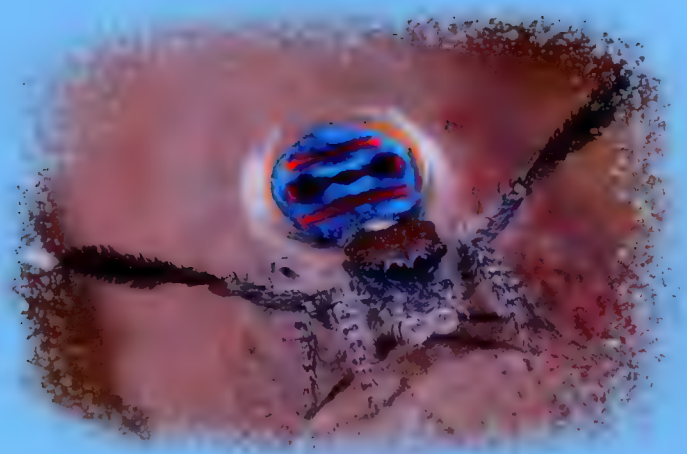






***Wee Beastie
Mouse Moseley***

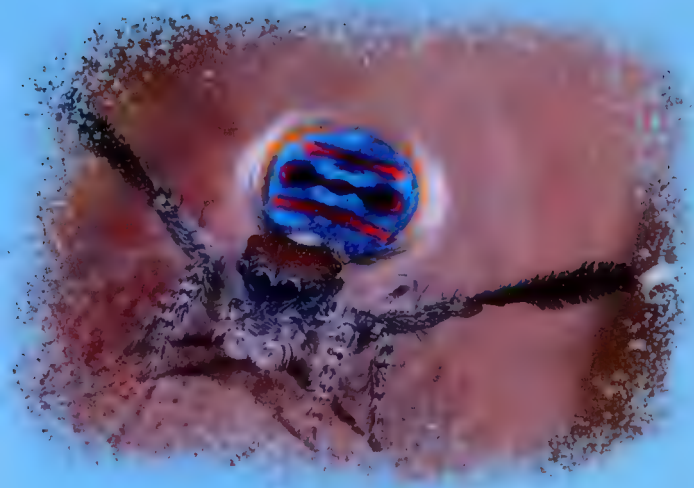




Anticipation
Elizabeth Weed



Snack Attack
Joshua McConnell

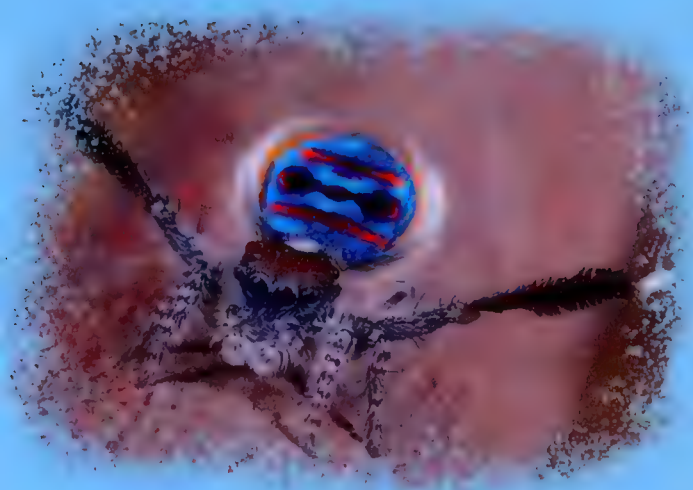


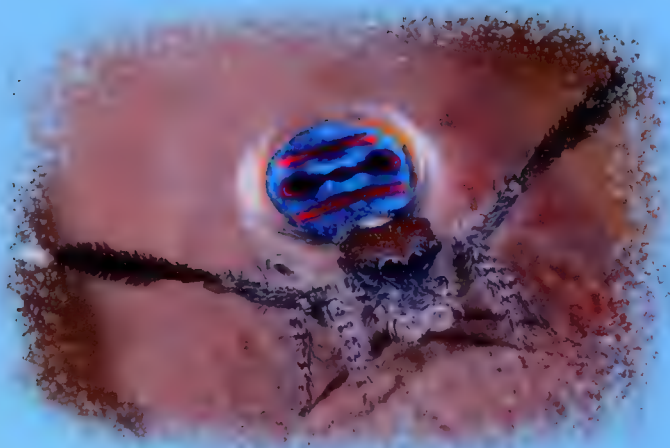


America Locale
Elizabeth Weed



Sheltered Newt
Ian Ventresca

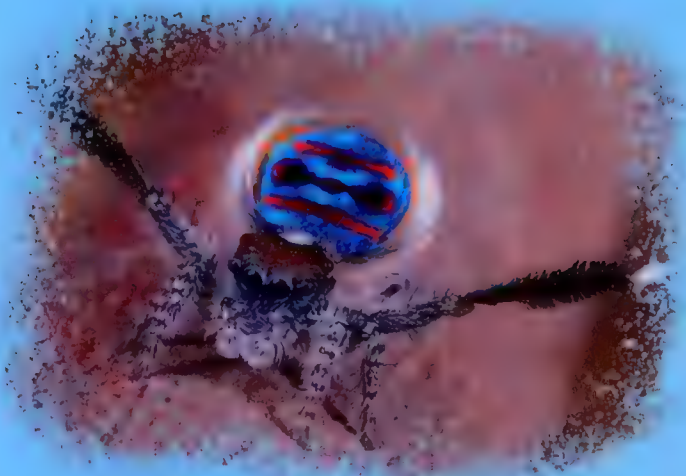


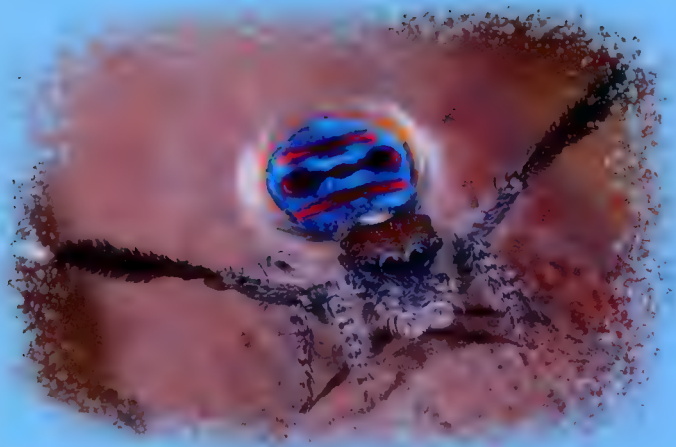


Lonesome Self
Elizabeth Weed



Could You Please Pass the Salt?
Brenda Evans

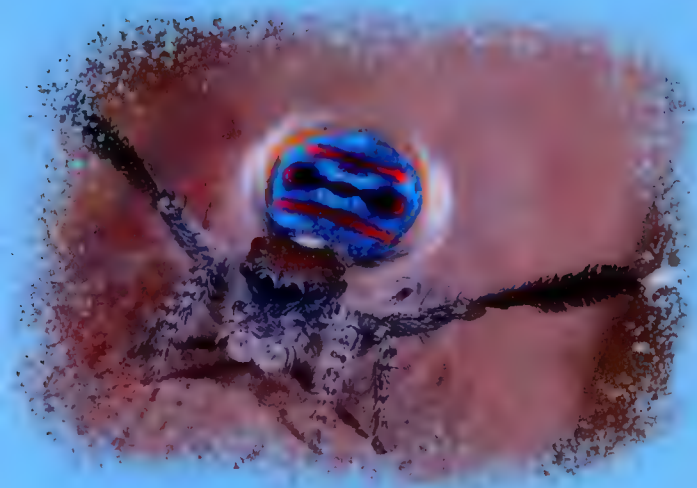


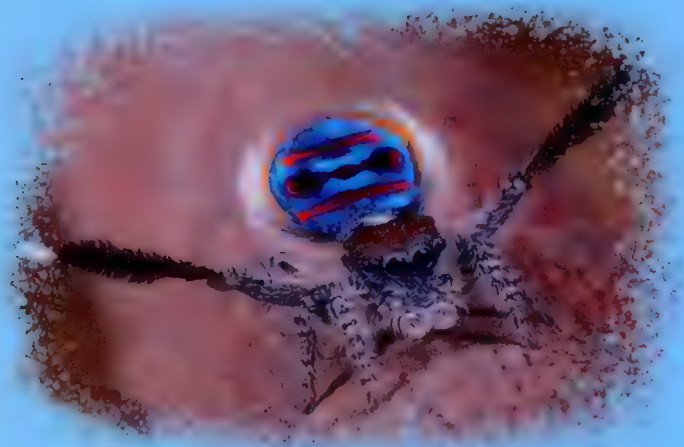


How Do I Get Down?
Joshua McConnell



A Somber Night's Cry
Sanaa Brown

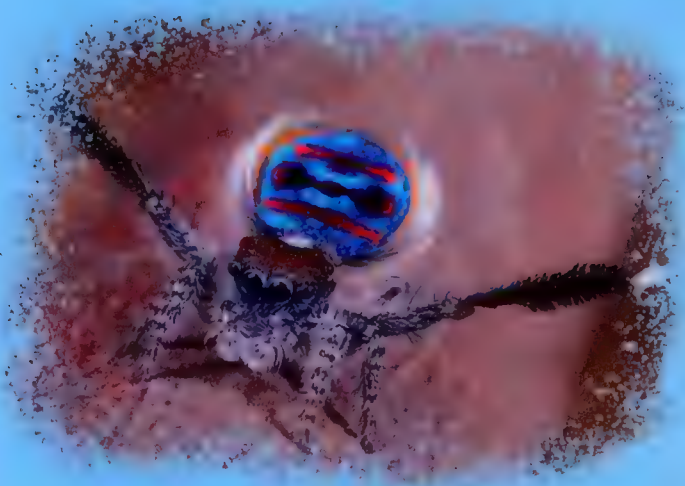


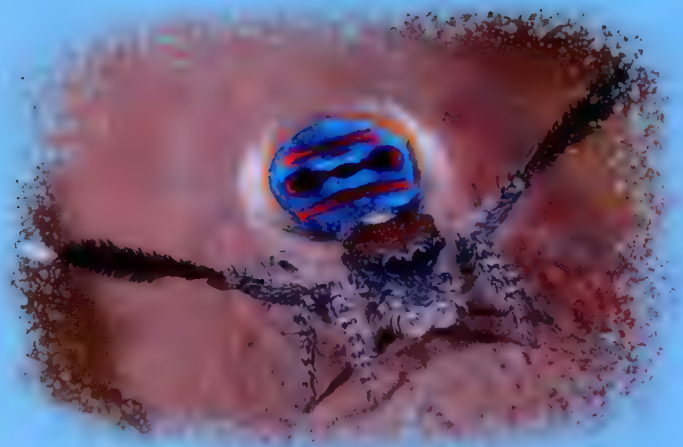


Still Waters
Elizabeth Weed



This is My Good Side
Joshua McConnell

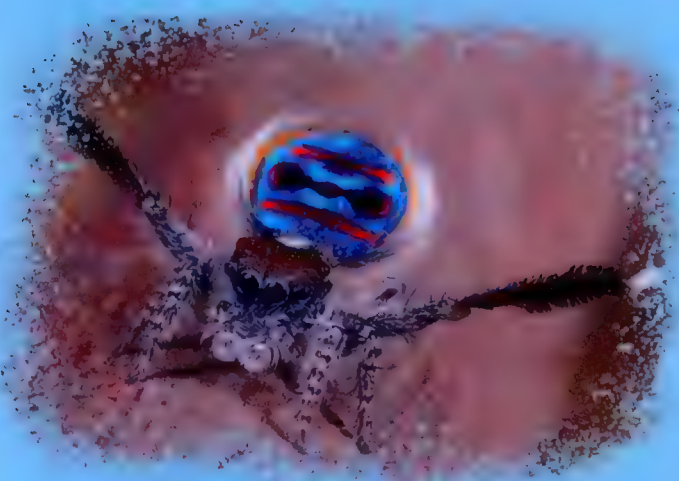


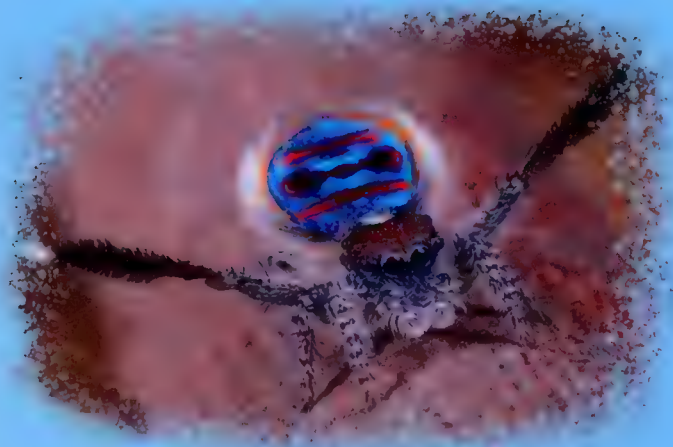


***Delicate
Elizabeth Weed***



Pocono Sunset
Ian Ventresca

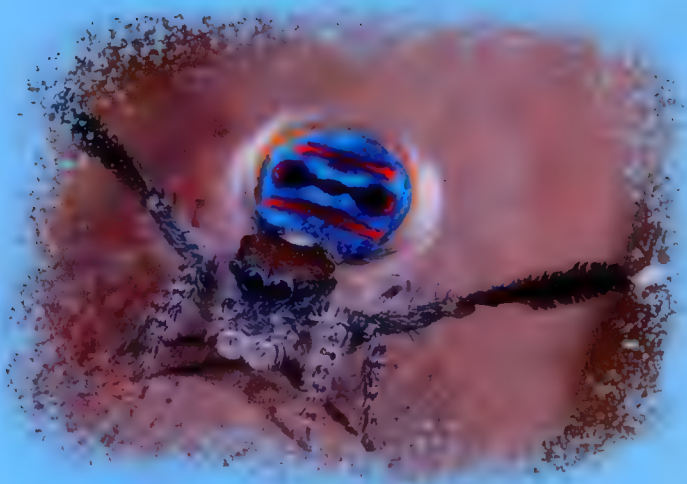


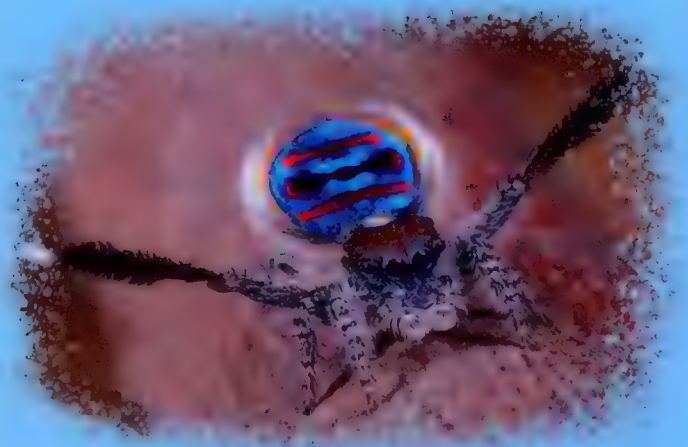


Self-Promotion
Elizabeth Weed



Nap Attack
Joshua McConnell





Dante
Brenda Evans





Sometimes

By Stephenie Giberson

Sometimes it gets to be too much.
Sometimes all you want to do is leave.
Sometimes you really miss your family.
Sometimes you miss the milestones.
Sometimes you feel all alone.
Sometimes you cry for no reason.
Sometimes you don't think there's a way out.
Sometimes you wonder if there's something wrong with you.
Sometimes you wonder why you simply can't adjust.
But then you realize,
What if you don't have to be like everyone else?
What if adjusting is just harder for you?
What if the little things eventually help?
What if that sunrise you see makes it easier?
What if that phone call helps you make it another week?
What if you celebrate that milestone anyway?
What if you see that one friend and you aren't so lonely anymore?
What if you finally find the way out of a tough situation?
What if there's no longer a what if?
Maybe one day the transition won't be so tough.
Maybe one day you'll find someone to ease the loneliness.
Maybe one day you'll celebrate the milestones properly.
Maybe one day you'll feel what it's like to be a part of something.
Maybe one day you'll finally see that you aren't broken.
Maybe one day you'll realize that life is what you make of it.
Maybe one day you'll discover the beauty in the little things.

What We're Owed

By Mouse Moseley

A woman walks the winding cobbled road with bare feet. This is not advised, but her last pair of soles has worn down. Sandals would be more common than bare feet; sandals are the shoes that are worn when people have nothing else, but she would hardly be able to keep them from slipping off.

If you were to look closely you would notice her heels have been clipped as well as her toes, five digits severed at the joint. It was how her mother had told her it must be done.

You know who she is. Everyone knows who she is.

You ask her one day: "Are you her, the stepsister?"

She rolls her eyes as an answer. You wonder where she gets the bravado to be as she is, peddling wildflowers picked along the road at dawn for mere pennies, and still be as she must have been so long ago.

"Were you the kind sister?" You ask.

"No. She is married to the baker and hides her shame with stuffed stockings at the cobbler."

Her voice is clipped and nasal and her features are pinched upward. It is like she was once a clay bust and before the sculptor fired her in the kiln, he took his finger and pressed her nose up like a child might in a fit of cruel mimicry. The sparse hair peeking from under her bonnet has gone white at the temples, but the rest is as wire black as it ever has been.

You know her sister. Her sons are just tall enough to see above the counter and they have started to observe their father as he handles your account. The youngest, a girl with red blonde hair who is always smudged with flour, has the same brown eyes as the woman in front of you.

"Have you atoned?"

"Are you planning to buy my wares?"



It is past midday and the blooms are all wilted. You give her all the change from your errands, money you would normally add to what you have tucked away in case of emergency. She hands you what you've paid for and you struggle to carry the armful, wondering how she managed it with grace; though, you'd hardly call her graceful.

She turns from you without further spectacle and begins her circuit from the village square back to the edge of the forest where her small house lies. Her gait is forever altered, a shambling thrust of one leg in front of another without the promise of stability.

One day, not long after the first time you dare to speak with her, she arrives steadier than she usually does. In the hand that does not hold her flowers, she instead leans her weight on a wooden cane. It is simple and unadorned but fine, and you think it has no embellishment whatsoever until she sets it against the brick wall of the building so she may adjust the blooms. Carved into the derby handle is the body of a dove, head round and feathers carved into waves that fit the grip of her fingers.

"It's lovely," you tell her. "Who crafted it for you?"

She casts a look back at it. "I made the relief," she says.

"You're very talented."

"It's old work, many years old."

You want to ask why she never used it before today, but you think you know the answer. On Sunday there was a service for her mother. The Queen herself paid for it. The service was respectful, the old Madame had a fine stone carved for her, and the birds tittered above as if they could breathe easy now that she was gone.

The Baker's wife soon sports a similar cane, this one swirled with flowers and vines. The woman hadn't been lying, this new cane shows years of progress compared to her dove handle. You wonder if her home is filled with her woodwork. You wonder if she hid it all in an old hatbox until her mother passed, and if so, you hope it now adorns the fireplace mantle in pride.

Really, you should be over asking such questions. Everyone should, how many decades does it take for a town to forgive? The Queen has, surely, as evidenced by the heads still attached to their torsos and the manicured gravesite that is only ever visited by the groundskeeper. You know she will give you nothing, you know you have no right to know, but you can't help but ask.

“Do you regret it?”

She pauses. A string of imperfect bluebells peaks out above her left ear. She sets her flowers down on the stand her brother-in-law has built for her outside of the bakery and takes her seat on her stool.

“I think we have all gotten what we are owed,” she says to you, arms unburdened.

“How do you know?”

She laughs. It's rude, the way her narrow face twists in front of you at your expense. Has she learned nothing?

Have you?

There is a woman in the village with ruined feet that feel the soft earth every spring. Perhaps she is not a kind woman. Still, whenever you have the means you purchase her bough for your table, and eventually a smooth wooden vase to house them. Each time she retraces her path home you hope that the cobbles are warm from the sun against her soles and that her sister has saved her some bread.

Curiosity Killed the Cat

By Zaida Martin

actually it didn't,
Turns out it was me.

And by cat I mean people
who know better than to
terrorize and pulverize and
cause tsunamis trailing
in their behemoth footsteps.

I also possibly ate the cake
That was saved for the kid's
Thirteenth birthday.

What can I say?
It was topped with
buttercream frosting.



A Response to Frost: Steady Onwards Through the Snow

By Mouse Moseley

Night falls cold and fills with stars;
We stop and yes, it feels bizarre.
Snow rests upon the bracken lake,
A frozen pane which halts the gar

My man has much sense, and yet
He sees these woods as minaret.
He stops to feel and stops to pray;
It keeps him captive in its net

I give my harness bells a shake
To rest assured he's still awake.
The saddle shifts and settles
I play I'm restless, for his sake.

He grabs the reins and softly sighs.
I steer so he may watch the sky.
We shall make it, by and by
We shall make it, by and by



Across the Face

By Ksenia Trentiakova

There was an immense weight on his skull, eyes compressed shut. Something crumbly and moist pushed around him like the cold, dead womb of a mother shot before she could deliver her child. He opened his mouth, struggling and gasping, wet sop filling his deformed lungs as he twitched and convulsed. Writhing, the original maggot within the flesh of the country. This is where he deserved to be re-born, gasoline and bits of plastic between the wet peat filling every orifice, sopping with his blood and other liquids. He thumped upward, the seed of corruption he was, clawing with everything he had. Not because he wanted to see the light, but because he knew he wouldn't be left alone even within the earth. Or perhaps downwards, further into his grave. He didn't know which way the *chekashnik* buried him. Either way, the direction wouldn't matter for some time as his life slowly faded out of his clogged airways again, and again, and again, every time the dead slammed its hand on the alarm, unwilling to awaken.

He had lost count of how often he had to be shaken by scolding Mother Earth to get out of bed before his hand felt air. He pulled, digging his nails into the stony, moist dirt mixture covered in scratches from the sharp stones within the ground. Well, some of his nails. Others were missing. You couldn't even call this fighting for his life. He coughed his heart, soul, and kidney out, throwing up with it, picking decomposers off of himself. "I'm one'a you, silly." It was like stepping out of prison. He almost wanted to climb back in.

He couldn't tell where he ended and the earth began. Wounds were so stuffed, bloodstream and body so full with all the wrong things, some of which he had put inside willingly. What was outside dirt and what was inside dirt? And did it matter to anyone but him? A woodpecker hammered above him as he pulled at the *finka* once hammered into his chest. It's true what they said about the internal cosmos, brains could splatter into a scene from Esenin's poems, hearts could form in the shape of a *kolhoz* woman's embroidery, and nerves on the back of a hand could twist into one of Lenin's speeches. Nature was the original artist. But she is not our mother. Nature is a neverending cheap grave. The *octoberling*, now turned *shestyorka*, had been buried under the road next to the *Gosteleradio* building to the idealist chitter-chatter of Radio Moscow. He

still had the address slip in his pocket, evidence of escorting someone to go '*on the room*' when they made their arrest. His fingers were stained with ink from the confession, and his chest bruised from being shoved against the wall. Still, he woke to the sound of the woodpecker and the stream.

The forest seemed well-measured from his crawling perspective, with barely-marked roads amongst the swamps, no imperfections in the chain, an ecosystem of law and order where the wolves howled for centuries, and the mushrooms returned everything to how it may be. He fell into the stream, spitting, swearing, and exhuming every word and opinion he had in the water like a ritual. Everything he thought about the NKVD and the righteous cruelty of someone given the ultimate moral treat, the permission to enact terror without guilt. The similar justifications for the *dedovshchina* and his *Vor V Zakone* oaths. Everything about his smuggling and the Leninist doctrine, the *Komsomol* ideal he was meant to become in the image of his father, even after he saw that this would lead him to his death. He could not believe himself to be the son of a war hero. This is what happened to the war heroes after all is done, or the ones popular enough to threaten the sitting regime. Dekulakization. Face the wall. Like father, like son. He continued to hiss. "My father put you in power! He fought for you! For your vision! And you's got the gall to arrest him for well-deserved comfort? The audacity to punish him for the cards you dealt? This-here's why I took my *bratva* oaths and fell to the same *finka*!"

The water bubbled under his lonesome wails, terminal and infectious, words, constructs, and hyperobjects spreading through the water like gasoline. Peace would find him instead of him doing otherwise, he had to believe it. He collapsed, cleansed, and lay there until time lost meaning. There was no suffering, as there was no word for such in this forest, only instinct. Then, he felt something brush against his leg. It gurgled at him.

"Don't even think about moving! Do not dare take your eye off of me, do not dream of escape. That's better." He jolted up, looking around for the voice as it continued. "I spread fear across this stream; my touch is your death warrant. I'll swallow you- wait, did I just say that out loud?" Within the water, by his bleeding leg, was an eel that bubbled to itself. "This is uncomfortable; I don't understand how to deal with it. You know what? You can go for now; my apologies." Kuzma had no choice but to respond, staring at the creature in bewilderment.

"Why'd you-?"

"I know, sharing your plans with your opponent is usually not a good

move. I don't know what to do. Especially with life on the line. I couldn't see the change, but when my prey started begging me for mercy, the word became a sharper tool than the claw," it interrupts. The man shifted away uncomfortably, stumbling over his words back.

"So, havin' moral doubts?"

"I tried to be clever; I did! I was not taught such things! I hate being sleazy and despise a liar; I say everything as it is. What am I meant to do? Please, be kind, climb into my maw. I may be a killer, but I am an honest one. My hunger tortures me, but my conscience does not." The *shestyorka* splashed water into his face, thinking of the lies that came so forced out of his mouth. They had always said that they already knew everything, and just needed a confession.

"Try on the half-truth and the technicality for size."

The eel was washed away without another word, but he could see its mumbling begin again by the trail of bubbles in the water. Words, parasites that they are, now flowed from every crevice of the forest. Jokes, sin, justice, words to sentences, he ventured to find shelter only to witness the rot from his chest and his chattering consciousness reflected from every tree. Had he done this? More than anything, his marked up, calloused hands itched to put everything back, the same as the fungus. Peace still ran from him, her tail flashing white through the forest, signaling for her child to follow. He watched the cat chase the mouse only to be debated out of swallowing its prey, the disorder at the lake where fish no longer swam in water but the nostalgic ruins of the past. A pang of something else threatened to spill out of him again, but he swallowed it in fear of infecting yet more. He twisted the ring on his finger until the spot under it turned as red as his ears. The squirrels were rioting, the frogs were satirizing, and no good came here of the human expression as the very beginnings of truth's ugly head came to peek out of her well to instill within the beasts a sense of shame. He heard the nasal cry of some small creature behind him.

"I am the voice of the people, he of the many! We are civilized," the rabbit exclaimed while two wolves chose a duel to the death over the prophetic shape of a leaf, "due to our ability to harness this speech and to know ourselves. As I am chased, I have the power to yell, 'Listen to these poems! And after this, reply only in verse, and you had better fill each one with meaning.' Oh, how it hurts to be so full of talent. You did not lose me yet, no? If you don't like it, you simply don't understand!" The *Vor V Zakone* was nearly brought to his

knees from the convulsions instilled by the narcissistic ramblings of the little propagandist's voice, remembering that same tone in the announcements of the Radio Moscow speaker. He retched but also shivered, opening up his posture, showing off the hole in his chest to all the world. He felt the pace of the rabbit's heart in his chest, how he stood facing the wall before the officers, the feeling of the ground falling onto his back as he was buried. Finally, he picked a piece of buckshot out of his once-smooth babyface like a pimple, regaining his composure and continuing to listen to the rabbit. "Where are you going? Animals, I am trying to open a new world to you; please, tell me what you think of me! You are so indifferent! I will give all my energy so you will notice and remember me! You do not care for culture, gray masses; only I can see the truth!" Kuzma groaned, trying to find anything worth saying within himself. Just one idea. A reason he wasn't worth shooting. Maybe the oaths of rebellion he made. Or the legacy of the father that he carried. He still completed his goal, right? Even if he was buried, he acted. He yells back.

"Shut it!" The inhabitants of the watering hole turned to the new creature. "Shut. it."

"That's him!" The rabbit tapped its foot on its little stump podium with recognition. It suddenly froze. "That's the creature who has given us this gift of speech! Hail! Hail!" Kuzma tried to back off. There was always someone in this forest who was wrong and who needed to know about it. The creatures were thinking; their thoughts were bringing their heads down with weight, pressing uncomfortably against their skulls like tumors. He had mutilated them. Their intentions drowned in the chatter of the mob. One of them asked for the meaning of life. He stumbled back, the stampede flooding him with questions and complaints, unable to move as the creatures blended into one another. A vice-grip of metaphor, philosophy, and rhetoric, heart beating out of his chest.

"What's a right?"

"How do you enact justice?"

"Don't you love your motherland?"

"What's love? How do you know you have it?"

He screamed, lip trembling beneath the spit, phlegm, and hooves of the ever-burgeoning crowd, howling until his eardrums popped out. The ringing was all there was, and the silence encompassed all. Who was he, some proletarian, to

know all this? Who was he to think and not to act? The herd stared at him. He stood, taking out the *finka* which was once in his chest, and carved a sentence into the bark of a tree. It said:

“You and I are free people.”

In the next month, the forest fell utterly silent. Letters. Letters on everything. Dug into the ground with antlers, scratched into the bark, an eerie all-encompassing emptiness as this story scratched itself into their earth in their first persons. Kuzma Neschadymenko lit a cigarette contentedly as he sat in a pile of fur and feathers the authors had left behind before they went away, exhausting their thoughts and leaving themselves hollow. He was left whole, having accepted injustice as it was. He had done something. He had held his oath. There was interesting reading material here. After all, a mouth is simply a scar left from communication across the face.

chekashnik: A derogatory term for a member of the KGB, formerly called the Cheka.

finka: A dagger issued specifically to KGB operatives.

kolhoz: A communal farm on which everyone both lives and works. Kol from Collective and Hoz from Hozaistvo, or husbandry.

octoberling: A title given to children born in the Soviet Union. After that they become Pioneers in secondary school and Komsomols throughout college. A Komsomol is later eligible to apply to be a member of the Communist Party.

shestyorka: The Russian syndicate equivalent to a mafia “soldier,” at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Gosteleradio: State Committee of Television and Radio Broadcasting of the Soviet Union.

on the room: Slang term for a common method of smuggling at the time, taking someone to see contraband western goods which are distributed in a decentralized manner across many civilian apartments.

dedovshchina: An informal hierarchy in the military or in militarist groups enforced by a kind of violent hazing, the premise being that those who have been there longer have suffered, and this gives them the right to enact the same

suffering onto those who had just arrived.

Vor V Zakone: Literally translates into “Thief in Law.” It has a similar meaning to “made man” in Italian syndicates.

Komsomol: The youth organization of the Communist Party, known for their community work and idealized image as the “future of the Soviet Union.” Those who are enrolled in it are eligible for later application into state jobs.

bratva: Slavic organized crime syndicate. It’s important to keep in mind that in this era they functioned more like a rebel organization than a real mafia, decentralized, with strong anti-authority ideological standpoints, and less focused on the bottom line.



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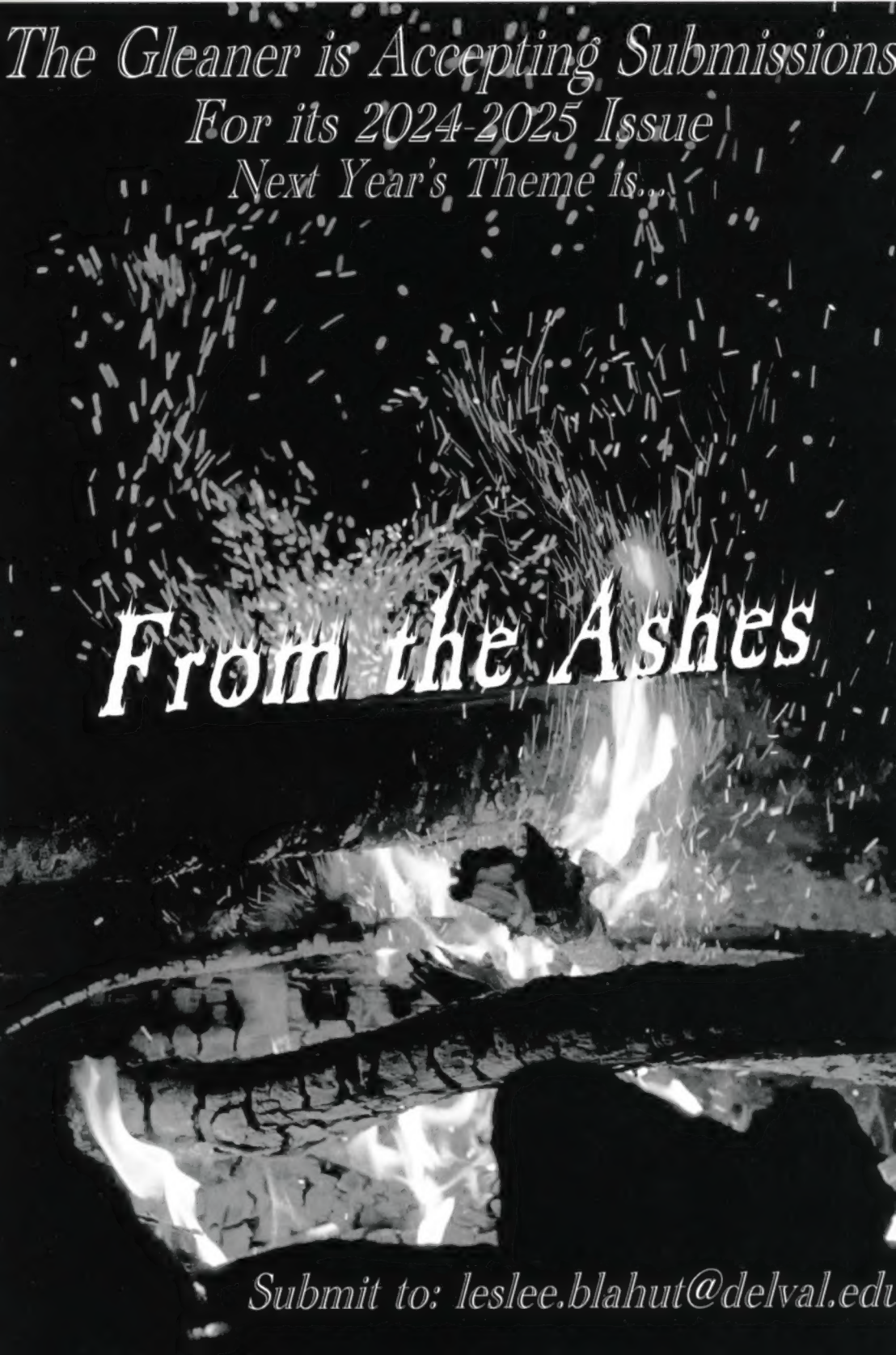
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